

ONE HOT SUMMER ON THE EAST SIDE OF DETROIT, 1992, WITH MR. BIG WORDS

Standing under the water, I turn it hotter and wash away the greasy stink of the diner. I rake my arms with a washcloth and revel in the clean smell of soap. Towel off, and Clarissa joins me in the bathroom. With her on my lap, I sit on the closed toilet and raise my chin. She uses tweezers to pluck ingrown hairs from my neck. My stubble grows thick. Some hairs curl and twist back into my skin. I tilt back my head as she plucks. Though I can't see her two-colored eyes, one blue, the other

I go for her neck. She lets me. I gently put my teeth on her jugular vein at the base of her throat.

brown, or hold her small white hands, her breath is hot on my neck, and her weight feels good on my lap.

I stare at a crack on the ceiling. "We've been doing this a long time."

"Yeah."

"It's intimate."

She laughs. "Uh-huh. That's true. I don't know why, but I love doing this. I

don't know who else would let me do this."

"Do you know why it's intimate?"

"Because it's kind of gross. And you don't mind."

"Okay, maybe that, too. To me, though, it's intimate because here you are with a pair of sharp tweezers. I'm vulnerable. If you wanted to stab me, you could. It wouldn't take much. You could kill me quick."

She pulls back and looks at me. "I never would've thought of that."

"It's the first thing I think of. You remember the Discovery Channel thing we were watching?"

"With the lions?"

"Yeah. The lion stuck his neck out, and she put her mouth on his neck. Her teeth were on him like this." I go for her neck. She lets me. I gently put my teeth on her jugular vein at the base of her throat. I growl, kiss her throat, and taste the saltiness of her skin.

"Hey, I'm working here."

I pull away, tilt my head back and feel the pull of the hairs as she plucks them. The bathroom smells of baby powder and our moldy shower curtain.

"You've got two hairs growing together. There's only room for one." She plucks, and shows me the tweezers.

One curly hair is gripped in the pincers.



Gunshots from somewhere out on Orleans. Clarissa grabs Gracie out of her crib. She wraps her body around her on the floor. I count one, two, three, four Mississippi, and go on till I hit ten Mississippi, and go to the window and pull aside the curtain. The street is bathed in darkness. The streetlight blinks on. Sneakers scrape the pavement. Somebody running. Then quiet. No sirens, no sounds, till Gracie cries out. Our baby, wailing. She quiets down as her mommy blows softly in her ear. I reach my arms around them and pull them close. Gracie falls back to sleep.

In her jeans and army-surplus T-shirt, Clarissa dries a pot. She purses her lips, opens the cupboard and sets the pot on a shelf. She returns my stare. "Hey, Mr. Big Words, what's the word today?"

"Quit teasing."

"Well? What's it going to be?"

"Alluvion."

"You're the smartest man on earth."

"Quit teasing."

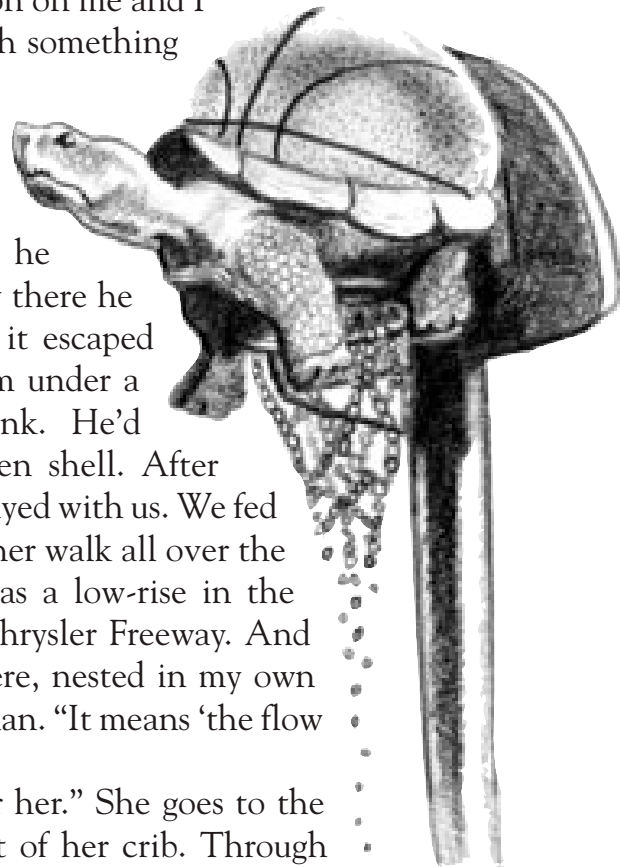
"What does it mean?"

"You want to know."

"Yeah, Mr. Big Words. Of course I want to know."

She's got all her attention on me and I savor this like a little kid with something small and alive. When my twin Addis and I were four years old, our father gave us a turtle he'd found crossing the street near the plant where he worked. How it found its way there he never knew, but we guessed it escaped from someone's home or from under a steel drum on the riverbank. He'd super-glued the turtle's broken shell. After he'd gone inside, the turtle stayed with us. We fed her and took her out and let her walk all over the world with us. The world was a low-rise in the Brewster Projects near the Chrysler Freeway. And now I'm not too far from there, nested in my own home with this fine, fine woman. "It means 'the flow of water against a shore.'"

"A flow, huh . . . I hear her." She goes to the bedroom and lifts Gracie out of her crib. Through the doorway I see how she holds her tenderly in both arms. She goes to the sink and squeezes lotion on her hands. Gracie's face



Bret Gottschall



wrinkles up in a little cry. Clarissa sits down beside me. She lifts her thin cotton T-shirt and nurses her.

About midnight, just before I fall asleep, I think of the wide blacktop and the ball sailing through the air.

My shift ends at three. I hang my apron on a hook and walk under the blazing sun. Heat beats down and my limbs feel like Jell-O. Rounding the corner onto Atwater, I see a man with thick arms and legs strutting toward me from a long block off.

“Addis!” he shouts. “What *you* doing here? Thought you were supposed to be....”

He has pockmarks on his cheeks from the chicken pox blisters he scratched until they bled. I forced myself not to scratch.

From what must be a hundred yards I shout, “I’m not Addis.”

The cornrows and scruffy face belong to Big Mac. As we near each other he shouts, “Oh, you Xavier. How *you* doing?”

“We look *different*.” For the last time, I want to tell the world, I’m not Addis. We’re both six feet tall, about a hundred and eighty pounds, brown

eyes, coffee-colored skin. We both went to Finney High but I finished and he dropped out. He has pockmarks on his cheeks from the chicken pox blisters he scratched until they bled. I forced myself not to scratch. He slouches. I stand tall. He lives north of Gratiot on the second floor of Brewster-Douglass high-rise building number two, and I live in a one-bedroom on Orleans. He’s a user and a killer; folks who know him fear him. I’m a husband and a father. He thinks life is empty, worthless and cheap. I hope it’s something more. “Don’t you see that?”

“Now I do. Say, you ballin’ soon?”

“On my way now.”

“Riopelle?”

“Yeah.” I’m sweating nonstop and don’t see how Big Mac can wear a Pistons sweatshirt over his blue jeans.

“You should’ve been at Burns the other day. Dude plays at UM was there. Boy could hoop! What *you* should’ve been doin’ in Ann Arbor with Terry Mills and Glen Rice and those clowns. All that talent in one place. Crazy. Burns is famous. We had thirty, forty guys waiting their turn. Pogo and me ran ten games straight. Couldn’t lose. High and rising. We running. You know. But you an East Side kid. You a Wolverine?”

“Never went to school there. I’d like to. But no. Not yet.”



“Addis say he had a smart brother.”

“He does?” Of course I notice how Big Mac said *had* instead of *has*—while our mother was dying, Addis began using more of the crack he was slinging: he left me alone to watch her hair fall out in clumps from the chemo. He didn’t visit her as she languished. I never forgave him for that. After she died I quit deluding myself into thinking I could make him change his ways; I quit trying to get between him and disaster.

“Yeah, you know he talk about you.”

“What else does he say?”

“He say you boys used to fight.”

“Yep.”

“And that he *never* had no dreams like you. You had your nose buried in some book while he was out causing trouble. Says he *always* had more fun than you but that you had the book smarts. What you goin’ do?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean, nigga, is what do you wanna’ be!?”

A thrumming sound like a giant insect’s wings makes it impossible to answer. A helicopter hovers a few hundred feet above with its steel blades chopping the air. It obscures the sun. An instant later it’s gone and the sound fades and the sun scorches us where we stand.

“I want to go to college and raise my baby girl so she knows she’s got a father who does right by her. But you’re wrong about Addis—about him not having dreams. He used to want to be a captain of a ship.”

“A what?!” Big Mac laughs so hard he doubles over. “Man can’t even swim.” With tears in his eyes, he stands straighter and stops laughing.

“Okay.” I mop my forehead with one hand. “You coming?”

“Be along soon. See you on the blacktop, X.”

Sweat shimmers on my arms. Charcoal ready to ignite. Feint left, crossover right, elude my man. Toss an alley-oop. Cinque leaps and snaps the rock down through the hoop. One-handed dunk. I whistle through my teeth and squint in the glare off the wide blacktop. On the field bordering Riopelle Park, weeds grow in clusters in front of an abandoned warehouse. All its windows are busted. The river surges over the rocks. To the east is Belle Isle. To the west: the tunnel to Windsor. To the south, some buildings mark the Canadian shore. We got our five. Big Mac feeds Pogo on the wing. Pogo stutter steps and drives: all you see is Pogo flying toward the hoop, his last-second finger roll.

Now the other squad losing their cool—

“Guard your man.”

“You that quick? You jump that high? You take him.”



“No problem. I got him. Play D, fellas.”

We can't lose. Spin move city. Next trip down, I feed Cinque on the block. He gives his man a head fake, spins, and rises: turn-around jumper—with his wrist flick follow

Spaces give this city its form:
from the hollowed out shells
of burned homes to the
cracked and potholed streets.

through, he can't miss. The dude I'm guarding brings the ball past half court. I knock it loose and snap the pill to Pogo who drives hard and ends with a flourish. Making it look easy. Like he was born holding the rock.

We win four straight, then Big Mac and Pogo and some others bounce. Only Cinque and I remain. Bone tired, we sit on a bench.

A rock dove flies out of a broken window on the warehouse. I stare at the shattered pane of the window—at the dark space inside. Spaces give this city its form: from the hollowed out shells of burned homes to the cracked and potholed streets. In the eaves of the old warehouse, rock doves build their nests. They fold their wings during the still-hot hours of night. Those doves have each other. I've got Clarissa. We had our wedding at the courthouse on Gratiot. The minister had dry lips and awful breath. Our two witnesses were children who lied about their age to sign our marriage certificate. I gave them five dollars apiece. Money I made washing dishes at the diner. Carrying trays loaded with cups, plates and silverware from the front to the back, I earn enough to pay rent. Run the Hobart and use the spray nozzle. Most afternoons, I fall asleep with my baby daughter on my chest, listening to the rhythm of her breathing.

The sun is brilliant. Sweat is slick on my arms and neck. Some scraggly sycamores grow this side of the rocks at the river's edge. With all the rain, the river has been rising. Waves of murky water surge over the rocks. Empty oilcans, a tire, branches and leaves gather in soupy piles that ebb and swell. I walk out on the blacktop. The ball feels worn, but the pressure is in there, built up and housed inside. It sails from my palm and clanks off the rim. Cinque rebounds and feeds it back to me. For each shot, I crouch—knees and ankles bend, my arms make a window, upper arms straight out from my shoulders, forearms raised high, right hand cradling the ball, the left steadying it. Push off, and *whoosh*. The ball lifts in the air and *swishes* cleanly through the net. The wind shifts, and I smell something foul.

Cinque stares at the river, how it thrusts and turns, swirls and rushes, and I hold the ball and follow his gaze. Out of a pile of muck on the rocks, something resembling a knee pokes out of the grime. I walk over. A face stares out of the debris at the hot white sky. The man is dressed in suit



pants, a collared shirt, black shoes. His bloated chest shows gaping wounds mashed with the thin cotton of his shirt. There is a smell of rotting flesh.

I've got a gut-level feeling that Addis killed this man.

Cinque sucks air through his teeth. "How long you think he's been dead?"

"Not long."

I try to imagine why Addis kills when we had the same mother, her quick fingers brushing strokes on canvas. I saw him use his knife. He slit a man's throat last February on the coldest day of any Michigan winter on record. I saw the whole thing from the 7-Eleven on the corner of Orleans and Atwater.

I've got a gut-level feeling that Addis killed this man. His brown skin is like Addis's and mine. No sirens wail. No cops show. No headline in the *Free Press* come Monday. Don't need to be Monday to know that. No bold print. Nothing like: ANOTHER EAST SIDE MURDER. No word. No nothing. The stench of the bloat. I open my blade and reach over the body and cut the cotton around his pants' pocket and grab his wallet. Inside are some pictures, a credit card, some cash, his driver's license. He has a name: Marco Smith. In one of the photographs, a little girl in pigtails smiles. She reminds me of Gracie. My face grows hot. Cinque takes the wallet, looks at the photos, pockets a five and hands me four ones.

"He'll never use this now." He tosses the wallet in the weeds.

"No," I agree. "He won't."

He's only a husk. Some kind of rind. Some kind of matter. Still, his features are carved: bulbous nose, square jaw, Adam's apple. Cinque squints into the sun, munches his lower lip, exhales.

We walk away from the dead man and sit on the bench at the edge of the court. Until the sun begins to sink below the buildings on the Canadian side of the river, it's quiet at Riopelle Park. Some dudes we know and like walk onto the court and begin to play. Their sneakers squeak on the blacktop. I stare at the river, but I don't see it move.

An old dude from Michoacán named Eufemio rolls his bicycle on the court. Rubbery scars run from his palms to his elbows. A small man with bowed legs and bright eyes, he looks at Cinque, then at me. "Smoke?"

"Two," I tell him.

Eufemio pulls tobacco from a pouch, rolls one, then another, and hands one to each of us. Cinque strikes a match, draws deeply. He runs his palm over his shaved brown head. Blue stripes circle the sleeves on his jersey. He closes and uncloses his fist. I light my own, and give Eufemio a five.



He hands me three ones.

“You owe me one.”

“I have something else.”

“It’s fifty cents a pop. Don’t play.”

“I have something better than *plata*.”

I frown. The Eufemio Scam. Here he is puckering to speak.

“I know stories. That you do not know.”

“Give me my dollar.”

“I need it for my wife. We need moneys. I leave it to the *manos de dios*. He bring you. So I tell you a story. One story, one dollar. What do you want to know?”

I admire his nerve. For this one time only—fuck my dollar. I just happen to be feeling generous. The sun does that. It causes mild euphoria in me. “There’s a zillion things I want to know.”

“What are they? No. Say one. Just one. You are my favorite nigger. So for you I answer one question. Give me a question and I give you a story. What is your question?”

“Are you fucking with me?”

“No. Why?”

“Don’t say that.”

“Why?”

“Just don’t.”

“Okay,” Eufemio says.

“You’re a funny ass spic,” Cinque says. “Think you can call my man a nigger? You know how I could hurt you?”

“What would you do?”

Cinque seethes. I give him a look that pleads, *Just chill. Let this one go*. He looks from me to the river to Eufemio. Ignorant fucking Eufemio. Pisses me off. Still, I try never to act out of anger. Cinque glares at him. “Who do you think you are?”

“I am a shaman and a storyteller.”

“Let’s have one,” I say.

The air is salty and windless. The sky over the river is orange.

“Okay,” Eufemio says. “You will maybe learn something from this story. My daughter came home from kindergarten one day, and she says to me: ‘Our teacher told us to learn about a tree.’ ‘Get your coat,’ I say. ‘We’re going out.’ I take her to the edge of the woods near our home and tell her, ‘Tell me the tree that speaks to you. Tell me the one you want to learn about.’ She takes her time, looking around, and she chooses a white pine. We go to the white pine and she rubs her hands on its trunk. I find some needles and put them in her hand. ‘What do you know about this tree?’ I ask her. ‘What do you see?’ She says, ‘Well, it’s got branches.’ This makes



me proud. 'And where do the branches come from?' She thinks about it. 'The trunk,' she says. 'And where does the trunk come from?' She thinks, then says, 'The roots.' 'And where do the roots come from?' She takes some time to think. 'The earth,' she says. 'Mother Earth.' 'That's right,' I say. 'And where does the earth come from?' 'The creator,' she says. 'Sí, y *del donde está el creador?*' She takes more time to think. 'Un sueño.' You see? She brought me there. From the white pine to the earth to the creator to a dream. She made the leap." Eufemio takes out a handkerchief. He wipes his forehead.

"Okay," he says. "My wife is waiting. You boys take care."

"We're men," Cinque says under his breath. "Not boys."

Eufemio yawns, turns, and walks away across the bumpy road, pushing his bicycle, hopping on, and pedaling. I watch him until he crosses Atwater. I turn and look back out at the rocks and the river.

"Crazy fucker," Cinque says.

"A dream. What about that?"

"Life's not some fucking dream."

Booths fill with men in jeans and women in skirts. I take a newly filled tray from under the counter and carry it to the back and set it down on the drain board. The light glints off spoons and knives. In my mind I'm standing over the dead man while Addis walks away from the river, his blade glinting in the sun. I separate silverware from cups and plates, work the spray nozzle, and run a load of dishes in the Hobart. A breeze blows through the open door. After I've gotten everything clean, I lean against a wall and watch the early shift waitress smoking in the back doorway. She's got nice curves and tired eyes. Smoke rises and spills out in the early morning light. The cook, a young dude just out on parole, works like a magician over the grill. The chatter from out in the diner rises over the sounds of eggs frying and bacon popping. Near the end of my shift I take a plate of sausage and eggs to a booth by the window and eat. Drink another cup of coffee. Taste the bitterness.

Home from the diner, I shower and put on clean clothes and follow Clarissa downstairs. Her day off from the laundromat. She pushes Gracie in her stroller. I walk alongside them, sweating. On the corner of Woodbridge and Dubois, I see my brother in a group of others. He smokes a cigarette, chin tucked down in his collar, eyes on the concrete under his feet.

"Addis."

He looks up with his glazed and reddened eyes. He says nothing. Just keeps quiet, and stares. I'm about to keep on going when he speaks.



“Xavier.”

“Yeah.”

Clarissa studies him. She has heard so much about him, but has never seen him. I watch her recognize me in him. She reaches for him and kisses his cheek. He accepts the kiss with a soft smile, the first I’ve seen him break in years. Gracie sleeps in her stroller. Our long walks put her out cold. Addis looks down at her and says, “That’s your baby.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

He touches her chin.

She wiggles and her eyes swim under her lids.

I don’t know what changes in him or where it comes from, but he spits on the ground near the stroller and his face shifts. He says something to one of his bulls, and his bull laughs scornfully.

“Good seeing you,” I say. I’m hurt, but not surprised.

I look over at Clarissa and her eyes glitter like broken glass. On down Franklin I push the stroller until we come to Orleans. Meanwhile I think

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the sun-swollen blacktop.

about Addis: how we used to wrestle over the last bit of macaroni, the bicycle we shared, the attention of our mother. Past Steel, the prison walls looming there, and on the other side of the street Cotton, the walls topped by barbed wire and guard towers every forty yards, we reach the row of duplexes, open the door to 8610 Orleans, walk past the landlady’s first-floor apartment and

climb the stairs to ours. Since we moved in together, we’ve been able to afford luxuries: a queen-sized bed, a crib for Gracie, cable TV, and a toaster oven.

Check ball at the top of the key. The lowering sun doesn’t diminish the heat. It rises—wave after wave rising from the tar. Give and go. Pogo stays with me. Wing a pass to Cinque at the block. He works for a shot on Big Mac, but the big man don’t give an inch.

I spot up inside automatic range. “One more.”

“Got you, X.”

Cinque grapples with Big Mac for position at the post. He throws me a bounce pass. He weighs about two hundred, but Big Mac must be two and a quarter. I jab step. Shoot and miss. Pogo grabs the board, dribbles twice and leaps off one foot for the moon. Finger-rolls. The ball pops off the backboard and rolls off the rim. High in the air, Cinque grabs the rock,



falls over Big Mac and smacks his head on the sun-swollen blacktop. I crouch near and tell Pogo and Big Mac to give him space.

I help him stand and walk to the bench.

We pound with Big Mac and Pogo. They bounce.

“You okay, man?”

“Yeah, I just need to chill.”

The river chops as the wind gusts and fades. A stink of rot in the wind. One of these days my brother will kill the wrong dude and the cops will search for him. They will never link him to his victims if they vanish. I will do this for him. I’ll try to keep him from ruin. The rift between us is as real as this wooden bench, the dark glow of the sky, the weight of water. It’s how we belong to each other. When we were kids the smell of our turtle belonged to the dark of our room—I used to reach in her tank and touch the place where her shell had broken and healed. Now I look at the silhouettes of backboards, chain-link nets, and bent rims against the darkening sky.

Dusk has been creeping in: blue light spreading shadows over the river, the rocks and the blacktop. I stand and walk to the edge of the river. The stench is sickening. Flies crawl over the body, buzzing. They boil in its mouth, then scatter in a gust. I grab a sodden length of wood lying on the rocks and push it against his hip. My sneakers slosh in ankle-deep water. I shove him a few feet toward the place where the rocks end and the river drops off and rushes away. I push him until his head and arms and chest are in the water. Another shove and he’s in. The current carries him downriver. He submerges, rises, floats past some pilings and disappears. 🗝️

